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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the results of two sociolinguistic studies of the Arabic spoken by men and women in Jordan and Syria in terms of sex differentiation in Arabic. The study reported in this paper proposes that the terms "prestigious" and "standard" should not be used interchangeably; accordingly, it reinterprets the previous findings. It is proposed that: (1) it is incorrect to posit only one standard speech variety in Arabic, the standard written form; (2) a prestigious spoken variety of Arabic exists independently of standard written Arabic; (3) it is this prestigious spoken variety that should be considered when conducting such studies; (4) prestigious spoken varieties of Arabic in a number of Arab countries have a number of features in common; and (5) the sociolinguistic pattern for sex-based variation in Arabic is the same as that reported for other speech communities. (MSE)

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ON THE NOTIONS 'STANDARD' AND 'PRESTIGIOUS' IN ARABIC SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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ON THE NOTIONS 'STANDARD' AND 'PRESTIGIOUS' IN ARABIC SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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In most sociolinguistic literature with which we are familiar in this part of the world, the terms 'standard' and 'prestigious' are explicitly or implicitly equated with each other. Since most such literature concerns English, I think that there is no great danger in using 'standard' and 'prestigious' interchangeably since for the native speakers of English standard speech tends to be prestigious and prestigious speech is usually standard. In recent years, however, some students of Arabic sociolinguistics have replicated some of the English sociolinguistic studies and stated their findings in almost identical terms. In this paper I shall examine the results of two recent sociolinguistic studies of Arabic and their conclusions (Abdel-Jawad 1981 and Kojak 1983; cf. also Abdel-Jawad 1983). More specifically, I shall examine those findings relevant to sex differentiation in Arabic and the two writers' interpretation of these findings. Interestingly enough, the two writers, who conducted their fieldwork in two different Arab communities (Jordan and Syria), obtained similar results to which they independently gave similar interpretations. I have no doubts as to the validity of the results obtained in these two studies, but I disagree with the authors on the manner in which they interpreted their results.

Sociolinguists seem to agree unanimously that sex-based variation exists in all languages. Furthermore, evidence adduced largely from English indicates that, other things being equal, women tend to consistently produce more standard and socially prestigious speech than men (for a comprehensive and thorough review of language variation and sex, see Smith 1979 and the references therein). One implication of this fact is that "women's speech is frequently more conservative and evaluated as better than men's speech" (Peñaloza 1981, 125). It may be worth remembering that such conclusions were arrived at largely on the

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basis of phonological data. The same kind of data was also the basis of the two Arabic studies under consideration. Kojak's study investigated the phonetic realization of the three interdentals /θ/, /ð/, and /ðˤ/ in the speech of a number of Syrian male and female speakers of Arabic in Damascus and Hama. Abdel-Jawad, whose subjects came from Amman, added to these sounds the voiceless uvular plosive /q/ as well as some lexical forms. As stated earlier, both studies came independently to the same conclusion. Thus, Abdel-Jawad found that his male informants "use the standard linguistic forms more than women" (1981, 324) and that "women use the standard prestigious forms in both careful and casual styles less often than men" (1983, 103; emphasis added). He then adds the highly significant remark that women "produce the Urban linguistic variants much more often than men" (1981, 324), that is, "women may lead in producing some local socially prestigious linguistic features" (1983, 103). From statements such as the above, he concludes that these Arabic sociolinguistic patterns "contradict the patterns reported in Western communities" since women in Amman "do not use the standard prestigious forms as often as men" (1981, 324; emphasis added). It is important for our purposes to notice how the writer equates in the above quotations the terms standard and prestigious. It is also important to take notice of what the writer calls "Urban linguistic variants" since, as I shall argue later in the paper, it is these variants which are both prestigious and standard with regard to spoken Arabic.

Turning to Kojak's study, we find much the same conclusions stating that "male informants use more prestigious forms than females" (p. 4). A little earlier the term 'prestigious' is explained with reference to "standard forms" and "classical Arabic" (p. 3). The same statement is reiterated in identical terms in the conclusion (pp. 39-40).

In what remains of this paper, I plan to do two things, namely,

1. to show why the terms 'prestigious' and 'standard' cannot and should not be used interchangeably, especially

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in connection with Arabic sociolinguistic facts; and, in the light of this,

2. to reinterpret Abdel-Jawad's and Kojak's findings.

That 'standard' and 'prestige' are not equatable even for such languages as English is easily attested in a number of studies. For example, Dittmar summarizes Labov's and other research on the question of language variation and sex in the following manner (1976, 237): "The results of virtually all investigations show that women adapt to prevailing prestige forms more than men." Moreover, Labov's work has shown that "prevailing prestige forms" may result from two conflicting forces, namely, a departure from the norm or the standard, in which case women seem to initiate and lead linguistic change, or, alternatively, from stricter adherence to the standard norm, in which case women can be described as being linguistically more conservative than men. Thus, women's speech is more innovative and more conservative at one and the same time. It is understood, however, that language in general and women's speech in particular, are far more conservative and stable than innovative and changing. In other words, more prestige in woman's speech often coincides with more linguistic stability and conservatism on their part. And both conservatism and prestige coincide more often than not with standard speech. It is in this sense that we can speak of, say, standard English as being the prestige variety. The same kind of logic, however, cannot be employed with reference to Arabic for a number of reasons. For one thing, standard written Arabic arose as a result of "a process of fairly self-conscious social and linguistic planning" (Peñalosa 1981, 88), whereas standard English resulted from different sociolinguistic and historical processes. This partly explains why more than one English variety are recognized as standard (British, American, etc.), but only one standard variety is recognized for written Arabic. Another source of difference between the two languages

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is the seeming confusion in the case of Arabic of the terms 'standard' on the one hand and 'official' and 'national' language on the other. As Peñalosa puts it (op. cit.),

> While written and standard language are characterized in terms of linguistic variables, official language and national language are matters of political decision or ethnic reality. The standard and the written language require the active cooperation of the speech community; an official or national language requires only passive acceptance.

The implications of this statement for Arabic are obvious. For the overwhelming majority of Arabs, standard Arabic exists only passively and enjoys no more than passive acceptance by them. Apart from the lip service that we tend to pay to standard written Arabic and its prominent role in our lives as Arabs, we have made no serious or meaningful attempt to make this variety of Arabic become the most prestigious variety in our daily life. If anyone has any doubts about the implications of this statement, let him/her start using standard written Arabic consistently in speaking to others. I think that we can all predict the unpleasant outcome of such an experiment. In the light of such an outcome, does it still make any sense to characterize standard written Arabic as the prestige variety of Arabic?

Moreover, unlike standard English, standard Arabic is never acquired without formal instruction and schooling. It is possible for an individual to acquire standard English simply by belonging to a certain socioeconomic class or through social mobility alone, but that is an impossibility in the case of standard written Arabic, the acquisition of which need not involve or depend on any social factors other than education. Social status or mobility in any Arab society, however, is sufficient for the individual to acquire a regional (i.e., spoken) prestigious variety. Because of these facts, and because written Arabic is

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not primarily a spoken language or a natively acquired tongue, no comparisons in terms of prestige should be made between written and spoken Arabic. In short, sociolinguistic prestige is possible without written Arabic and in its absence, and the presence of the written Arabic variety alone does not guarantee that its user will be automatically endowed with such prestige.

But even if we agree to attribute prestige to standard written Arabic, it is important that we realize with Mitchell (forthcoming, 25) that "Prestige does not in fact attach to written Arabic only." Abdel-Jawad's and Kojak's problem lies precisely in their not realizing that prestige may attach to any Arabic variety besides the written one. It also lies in their not realizing that the spoken varieties have their own "pecking order of prestige" (loc. cit., 14-15) and that "speakers from the capital cities ... set standards in their own countries" and continue to have clear ideas as to what is prestigious and what is stigmatized (loc. cit., 26). In fact, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that we can go further on this matter than Mitchell has suggested. Speakers in capital cities do not set standards in their countries only, but outside them as well. Moreover, what is prestigious and stigmatized is no longer confined to such speakers, but is the common knowledge and stock of speakers of Arabic who live outside the capital cities and even outside the countries in which these cities are located. Jordan itself, with such linguistically heterogeneous towns as Amman, Zerqa, and Irbid, is a good illustration of this claim. There can be little doubt that the most highly valued speech varieties in Jordan are those characteristic of urban Palestinian population. There is also some evidence, not yet documented, that the urban speech varieties of Egypt and the Levant are valued highly in countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Still more significant in this connection is Wagialla's documentation (1982, 256-258) of a number of urban Egyptian forms in the speech of educated Sudanese speakers.

Mitchell (loc. cit., 27) also suggests that speakers shun certain forms partly "to avoid ridicule" which may be invited

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by a speaker using stigmatized forms. It is interesting to observe that all the phonological features investigated by Abdel-Jawad and Kojak are stigmatized in spoken Arabic in spite of their being part of the phonological system of standard written Arabic. This shows clearly that it is possible to invite ridicule by using features and forms found in written Arabic. Consequently, it is not enough for a linguistic feature to be associated with written Arabic to escape the stamp of stigma. The astonishing fact is that this applies to the speech of most urban centers of the Arab East including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. In all of these countries, the prestigious spoken variety includes none of the sounds [θ], [ð], [ð], or [q]. It is as if a supraregional variety, analogous to written Arabic itself, has come into existence in these countries. This supraregional variety has local mutually intelligible varieties in the urban centers of the individual countries concerned. There can be no better proof as to the existence of this supraregional variety than the fact that the urban varieties of the above named countries are mutually intelligible whereas other varieties may not be so.

All this leads us to conclude that, for Arabic, we must recognise a prestigious spoken variety which is different from the written standard. Once this is realised, the reinterpretation of Abdel-Jawad's and Kojak's data becomes an easy task.

We have seen already that Abdel-Jawad came close to a correct interpretation of his data when he stated that women "produce the Urban linguistic variants much more often than men" (1981, 324). The Urban forms are nothing but the prestigious spoken forms which, in this case, include using [s] and [t] for [θ], [z] and [d] for [ð], [ɪ] and [ɒ] for [ð], and [ʔ] for [q]. If that is what women speakers of Arabic do, then they surely conform to the universal sociolinguistic pattern and do not constitute an exception to it.

Kojak presents an almost identical picture: women in both Damascus and Hama used more local prestige forms than men,

which again confirms the pattern found elsewhere. What is interesting, and at the same time dangerous, about Kojak's work is the number of contradictions it contains which arose as a result of her misinterpretation of the data. Two illustrative examples should suffice:

> The findings of the present study show that male informants use more prestigious forms than females. Interestingly, the scores of female speakers who have a less dense social network in a society where segregation between men and women reaches a high point turn out to be higher than those who live an open social life. (p. 4)

> ...; men approached more the prestigious classical variety of Arabic both in Hama where women are highly segregated and excluded from public life and in Damascus in the case of women who lead an open social life. The interpretations for sex-related differences, which seemed ironic, were reinforced by the findings of this project; women in Hama used more prestigious forms than women in Damascus who seem to enjoy a 'better' social position. (p. 39)

If 'more prestigious' was replaced by 'less prestigious' in the above quotations, everything would fall in order and the contradictions and irony felt by Kojak would be removed. It is clear that the classical forms do not enjoy the prestige Kojak would like to attribute to them. If we accept that Kojak's more prestigious classical forms are the same as our less prestigious spoken forms, it becomes obvious (and not interesting or ironic as Kojak says) why women should use fewer interdentals than men. This will also explain why women in Hama use more interdentals than women in Damascus, since Hama is not the urban center that Damascus is and, therefore, its speech variety does not enjoy the same prestige as that enjoyed by the Damascus variety. Our interpretation is supported by Kojak's data which show that men in Hama also use significantly more interdentals than men in Damascus

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(cf. figures 3 and 4, pp. 36-37). But Kojak remains silent on this fact because it contradicts what seems to have been a pre-conceived theory on her part, namely, that "in a male-dominated society in which the position of women is unequivocally inferior" women "tend to use less prestigious forms than men because they are relatively excluded from public life and because the society of the two sexes is segregated" (p. 39). Without going into the details of the fallacious thinking underlying this statement of the problem, I would like only to point to the long standing sociolinguistic generalization that speech is merely a reflection of underlying social realities and not a consequence of them. It is wrong, therefore, to conclude that because women in a particular society might enjoy a social position which is inferior to that of men, they would necessarily use an inferior language variety. If this were true, then women in most societies, including the Western ones, would be speaking inferior language varieties and all the reports about women using more prestigious language and the conclusions drawn from such reports would be automatically rendered nonsensical. If for most (all?) societies investigated so far, it has been found that "women, despite their more standard speech, do not enjoy a prestigious position in society compared to men" (Smith 1979, 113), why should one expect or hypothesize the opposite to be the case in an Arabic-speaking community? In fact, this universal socio-linguistic paradox of women using more prestige language than men while they themselves enjoy less social prestige has been repeatedly explained with reference to women's universally inferior social position. It is precisely because women have an inferior social position and are, therefore, less secure socially and psychologically, that they are expected to 'behave themselves' linguistically and otherwise. For the men on the other hand, who, because of their dominant position in society, are much more secure vis-a-vis women, there is much less need for good social behavior of which language is but one type. But all of these facts have been ignored by Kojak who seems to have been blinded by her own presuppositions.

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To sum up, then, I hope that in the course of this paper, I have shown the following to be true:

1. That it is incorrect to posit only one standard speech variety for Arabic, which is standard written Arabic;

2. That a prestigious spoken variety of Arabic exists independently of the prestige of standard written Arabic;

3. That it is this prestigious spoken variety which should be taken into consideration when conducting studies such as those referred to in this paper;

4. That prestigious spoken varieties of Arabic in a number of Arab countries have a number of features in common; and

5. That the sociolinguistic pattern for sex-based variation in Arabic is the same as that reported for other speech communities.

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